E475
.81
A87

475
1
87
py 1

Chickamauga.

Useless, Disastrous Battle.

Talk by Smith D. Atkins, Opera House, Mendota, Illinois, February 22, 1907, at invitation of Woman's Relief Corps, G. A. R.

E475
.3
.A87

When the Civil War came in this country forty-seven years ago, I was a young lawyer in Freeport, with not a particle of military schooling, and not the slightest inclination for military life. But when our good President, Abraham Lincoln, made his first call for three months' volunteers in April, 1861, I enlisted as a private soldier, and when mustered out at the end of three months, I again enlisted as a private soldier, resolved that I would serve in the army until the rebellion was crushed. Promotions came to me very rapidly. I always had a larger command than I believed myself capable of handling.

On August 16th, 1863, when the movement of the Army of the Cumberland began from Winchester and Dechard in middle Tennessee against the Army of the Confederacy under Bragg at Chattanooga, I was not, as a matter of course, informed of the plans of the campaign, for I held only the rank of a colonel of a single regiment, and a boy at that, attached to Wilder's Brigade of Mounted Infantry, armed with Spencer repeating rifles, the best arm for service in the field ever invented, better than any other arm in the world then or now, so simple in its mechanism that it never got out of order, and was always ready for instant service.

All the world knows now that the object of the campaign was the capture of Chattanooga. I am not an educated soldier; I am not capable of making any technical criticism of military campaigns; my opinions possess no military value; I know nothing of grand tactics, and very little of any kind of tactics; since the war I have made no critical study of that campaign. I am averse to such studies; when the war ended I tried to put behind me everything connected with the war, and devote my whole attention to the duties and pursuits of peace; I would not talk about, or read about the Civil War. I placed in my library many volumes of campaigns in which I was engaged, but I would not read them. By accident one day I took up a little volume, "Hood's Advance and Retreat" over ground with which I was familiar, and read

it with intense interest, and I afterward read with interest many volumes concerning the war.

When the advance of the Army of the Cumberland began it was the desire of General Rosecrans, commanding the Army of the Cumberland, to confuse and mislead Bragg, commanding the Confederate Army. In that he was signally successful. Sending a portion of his army, cavalry, infantry and artillery, across the Cumberland mountains into the valley of the Tennessee north of Chattanooga to threaten that city from the north, he led his main army across the Tennessee at Bridgeport, Tennessee, and Caperton's Ferry, Alabama, and crossing the mountains into Lookout Valley, swung his army to the south and west of Chattanooga, rendering the occupation of that city untenable by Bragg with his line of supplies threatened in his rear. From my slight acquaintance with famous military campaigns I believe that the display of grand tactics by Rosecrans fairly rivals that of anything in history, and was as brilliant and successful as the famous campaign of John Churchill, the Duke of Marlborough, before the battle of Blenheim in 1704.

Instead of commenting on the campaign of the Army of the Cumberland against Chattanooga, which I freely grant that from a technical military point of view I am incapable of, I prefer to dwell upon the movements of my own regiment in that campaign.

In the afternoon of August 16th, 1863, my regiment, attached to Wilder's Brigade, moved out from Dechard, and climbed the Cumberland Mountains to University Place, and crossing into the Sequatchie Valley, climbed and crossed Walden's Ridge, reaching Poe's Tavern in the Tennessee Valley, twelve miles north of Chattanooga, on the 21st of August; on the 22nd, Wilder and his brigade went to a point north of Chattanooga to directly threaten that city, while my regiment went to Harrison's Landing, threatening to cross at that point fifteen miles north of Chattanooga. We found the enemy in earthworks on the edge of the river on the opposite bank, with quite a heavy fort on the hills back from the river, mounting three guns en barbette. Our Spencer rifles carried over the river easily, nearly a mile wide, and the Confederates were kept closely within their rifle pits by our sharpshooters.

For a bullet from a rifle to travel a mile takes a long time. Let me illustrate that. The Confederate officer of the day, with his sash across his shoulder, came riding down to the river from the Confederate fort, and was soon kneeling under a box elder tree on the bank of the river, and I said to my adjutant standing by me, "What is he doing?" but I had hardly asked the question, when a blue puff of smoke told me that he was shooting at us;

Adjutant Lawver stepped behind a tree, when the bullet from the Confederate rifle passed over my head, and through the side of the house by which I was standing, wounding one of my soldiers inside of the house, the first soldier in my regiment to be struck with rebel lead. If you see a man shooting a rifle at you a mile away, you will have abundant time to dodge before the bullet reaches you; if you can dodge behind a tree, as my Adjutant did, you will be safe; but if you are in the open you may as well stand still, for you are as liable to dodge in front of the bullet as away from it.

On the 24th of August I returned to Harrison's Landing with my regiment and two 10-pound rifled guns of Lilly's Indiana Battery, under a Lieutenant. He was a volunteer officer, but a studious one, and had mastered the science of artillery firing. I placed the two guns on the bluff on our side of the river, and ordered the Lieutenant to open fire at the Confederate fort, probably about two miles away, when I rode on to the bank of the river, opposite the Confederate fort, where I could plainly see the effect of the artillery firing. I waited an hour for the guns to open, but they didn't, and I rode back to see about it. He had cut down some trees to get a plain view of the Confederate fort, dug holes for the trails of the guns, and there they stood, pointing at the sky, and the Lieutenant stood there steadily eyeing the Confederate fort, with its three guns, en barbette, a brass gun in the center and a steel gun each side of it. I yelled at him to know why he didn't fire, and he replied, without taking his eyes from the fort, "I am waiting for some one to stand up on the parapet of the fort; I have an instrument here (a flat piece of brass full of holes of different sizes) by which I can tell the exact distance in yards if some one will stand up; with another instrument I know the elevation, just how much lower that fort is than where my guns stand." I replied, "Perhaps no soldier will ever stand up," and he answered, "Oh, yes, there will," and almost immediately said, "There, I have got it," and while he kneeled upon the ground to figure out the problem, and cut his shells, and load his guns, I dismounted and went down the bluff immediately in front of his guns until I found a place from which I could plainly see the Confederate fort, and, adjusting my field glass, hoped to see the effect of his shots; but I was enveloped in smoke when he fired, and could see nothing. But we learned the effect of his scientific firing a few days afterward when we captured a copy of the Daily Chattanooga Rebel, printed on wall paper, Henry Watterson, now the distinguished editor of the Louisville Courier-Journal, publisher, that said the Yankee artillery at Harrison's

Landing at the first fire dismounted the brass gun in the Confederate fort, and killed four men. No one showed himself about that fort afterwards, and, although he continued firing, more to make a noise and worry Bragg at Chattanooga than anything else, the Confederates made no attempt to reply to our artillery. Those two shots by him, scientifically fired, after he knew the elevation and distance, hit the mark and did the business. Roosevelt says, "It is the shots that hit that count;" that is true. One center shot is worth forty shot at random. That is why Dewey, in Manilla Bay, sunk the Spanish fleet. I spent several days, a few years ago, at Fortress Monroe, in Virginia, and all the forenoon of each day listened to the firing of heavy guns by the battleships of our navy at targets, when it cost five hundred dollars for every shot fired. The absolute accuracy of scientific firing is an astonishment. I have seen a man fire sixteen shots at a target one even mile away, ad hit the bull's eye every shot, and he declared that he could hit it every time for a hundred shots. Our navy is made up of volunteers; it is expensive to educate them, but they make the best gunners in the world, and if we keep a navy at all, it is the greatest economy to keep it always in a state of the highest efficiency.

Our country has, and always will, depend upon patriotic volunteers in time of need. I read in an English magazine that an Englishman on one of Dewey's ships in Manilla Bay noticed that the gunner's lips moved as if he was saying something after each shot. He crowded up close to him, and every time the gun was fired the gunner said "Cash." The Englishman told the captain of the ship about it, who said the explanation was easy—that gunner before he enlisted in the navy was a dry-goods clerk, and always said "Cash" when a transaction was completed. The soldiers who saved the Republic were citizen soldiers, the best soldiery in the world, and it will always be so while the Republic shall endure.

On September 4th, 1863, my regiment was ordered to join Wilder, north of Chattanooga, and on reporting to Wilder I found that my regiment was ordered to report to General Thomas to be used by General Rosecrans for scouting purposes, and immediately ascended to the top of Walden's Ridge, a continuation of Lookout Mountain, on the north side of the Tennessee River, and from that elevation I looked for hours with my field glass into the deserted streets of Chattanooga, and became convinced that Bragg had evacuated that Confederate stronghold. Crossing the Tennessee River on the pontoons at Bridgeport, I reported to General Thomas, and in person to General Rosecrans at Trenton, twenty miles from Chattanooga, on the west side of

Lookout Mountain, on the forenoon of September 8th, 1863, and gave General Rosecrans my reason for believing that Chattanooga had been evacuated by Bragg, and nothing left there but his cavalry to curtain his movements. I told General Rosecrans I had found a cow-path on the west side of Lookout Mountain, four miles from its head, that cattle could go up onto the mountain, and offered to send a body of the Ninety-Second men onto the mountain by that cow-path, and drive the enemy's cavalry from off the mountain, demonstrating that Chattanooga was evacuated, and by the order of General Rosecrans I did so, and again reported to him in person at Trenton about 9 o'clock on the evening of September 8th, 1863, and was ordered by him to take the advance into Chattanooga on the morning of the 9th of September, 1863. Crossing the nose of the mountain on the Nashville road early on the morning of September 9th, I found the enemy's cavalry holding the road, and my regiment was driving them over the mountain when Wilder's Brigade battery from Moccasin Point on the north side of the Tennessee began throwing its shells onto the mountain, enfilading my line of skirmishers, and I was compelled to fall back. It was decidedly disagreeable to be fired upon by the artillery of the brigade to which my regiment belonged. How to communicate with Wilder and stop that firing was a difficult problem, and I thought the only way to do so would be to have some one swim the river; but that would occasion long delay. A little boy, a stranger to me, said he had served in the signal corps, and could send a message by tying his handkerchief to two hazel sticks, and when he was ready, standing on a jutting rock where he could be seen by Wilder's men across the river, he inquired what message, and I said, "Ninety-Second Illinois," and he had not long been waving his flag, spelling out the words, when Wilder's men on the north side of the river set up a great cheer, and, knowing they would no longer fire upon us, we pressed forward, driving the Confederates before us and off the mountain, and at 10 o'clock a. m. the flag of the Ninety-Second Illinois Volunteers was floating from the top of the Crutchfield House, the first Union flag to float in Chattanooga since Bragg's army occupied that place.

I had brought to me every person I could find, and sent word back to Rosecrans that Bragg had evacuated the city and fallen back beyond Chickamauga with the intention of giving battle as soon as his reinforcements came from Lee's army in Virginia.

Now, keep this date carefully in mind, September 9th, 1863, while the battle of Chickamauga was not begun until ten days after that, on September 19th, 1863. I believed then, and I believe now, that General Rosecrans could have put the Army of

the Cumberland into Chattanooga by the evening of September 10th, 1863, without the loss of a man or a wheel. I know that he could have done that, and the battle of Chickamauga, with its awful loss of life, have been wholly avoided. It was a useless battle, and because it was useless and disastrous Rosecrans was relieved from the command of the Army of the Cumberland, and was never again restored to favor as an army commander. These views are not new; they were entertained and expressed by me at that time, and I have entertained them ever since, and never hesitated to express them. The battle of Chickamauga was a useless battle, the broken and shattered Army of the Cumberland driven from the field and cooped up and nearly starved to death in Chattanooga, that Rosecrans was in full possession of on September 9th, 1863, and which might have been held by him with his full army intact, with abundant force to protect his line of supplies, and where he never could have been or would have been assaulted by the Confederate army. That was my deliberate judgment at that time, and, it will be, in my opinion, the deliberate judgment of history. My opinion may not be worth much, because I am technically not an educated soldier. Neither was John Churchill, the Duke of Marlborough, the greatest soldier England ever produced, an educated soldier. He was absolutely without any military education whatever when he was placed at the head of the English army. Common sense is often quite as valuable as technical military knowledge, and by every rule of common sense, Rosecrans should have occupied the evacuated city of Chattanooga when he became in full possession of it on September 9th, 1863, and have avoided entirely the bloody and disastrous battle of Chickamauga.

My orders from General Rosecrans were to enter the city of Chattanooga, obtain all the information possible concerning the evacuation by Bragg, and to return to him with my regiment. When I was ready to start back the road was filled with Crittenden's corps of the Army of the Cumberland, that followed me into Chattanooga, and when just ready to return I was ordered by General Crittenden to go up the Tennessee River to Fire Island, ten miles, and enable Wilder with his brigade to cross. I told Crittenden of my order to return to General Rosecrans, but he gave me positive orders, and I obeyed, driving small parties of the Confederate cavalry before me until I reached a famous grape plantation eight miles north of Chattanooga, where I learned that Wilder's Brigade was already crossing the river; putting my regiment into camp I rode forward to communicate with Wilder, and was by him positively ordered to march with his brigade the next day, which I did, camping at night at Gray-

ville, almost directly east of Chattanooga, and during the night I received positive orders to report with my regiment to General Rosecrans at La Fayette, Georgia, and moving before daylight on September 11th I struck the Confederate pickets about two miles north of Ringgold. Sending word back to Wilder I dismounted my regiment, when the enemy mounted and moved out to charge my line—waiting until they were close upon me my repeating Spencer rifles halted their charge and turned it back. Then they formed in two lines to renew the charge when Wilder came up with a section of 10-pound rifled cannon, and opened immediately. Instantly the artillery fire was answered, but not a shot came near us; firing again with our artillery, instantly came the response. We did not know it then, but Crittenden's troops were approaching Ringgold from the west and we from the north, and it was Crittenden's guns we heard, while Forrest retreated through Ringgold gap. Had Crittenden's troops and Wilder's Brigade been acting in concert, General Forrest and his cavalry would have been captured at Ringgold. Sending out a company on the La Fayette road, the enemy was found in strong force at the Chickamauga River, and my regiment marched to Rossville, reaching there after dark. Confident that Rosecrans was in Chattanooga, and not in La Fayette, I sent officers to Chattanooga before daylight on the 12th of September, but they did not return to me, and an hour after daylight I took the road to La Fayette, striking the enemy in strong force at Gordon's Mill on the Chickamauga. I was without corn for my animals, and finding a cornfield I fed my horses and filled the nose-bags with corn, and was just about to cross the river with my regiment when I received a written order from General Rosecrans to send my regiment to the foot of Lookout Mountain and report in person to General Rosecrans at Chattanooga, which I did, and was ordered to find Thomas somewhere on Lookout Mountain, and marching all night down the mountain I communicated with Thomas at daylight on September 13th, and sent word to General Rosecrans at Chattanooga. During the day my regiment followed General Thomas down the mountain on its east side at Dug Gap. On the 14th, 15th, 16th and 17th of September with my regiment I scouted the country between Dug Gap and Gordon's Mill, finding the crossings of the Chickamauga always heavily guarded by the enemy. I was never ordered to scout south and east of the Chickamauga River. I never knew why. No Union soldiers ever were sent by Rosecrans south of that river so far as I know. The woods were full of Rebel spies pretending to be deserters, and by the order of General Rosecrans none of them were arrested or interfered with in any way, as Rosecrans believed that Bragg's army was disintegrating and going home, and General Rosecrans

thought that the Rebel spies were deserters from Bragg's army. They were not. They were well and strong, and well clothed, and such men seldom desert from any army. I never could understand the infatuation of a Union General who by his own official orders filled his camps with spies from the forces opposing him.

Early on the morning of September 19th, 1863, the Army of the Cumberland began its race for Chattanooga, where that army might have been and should have been safely placed ten days before that time. In that race the Army of the Cumberland was attacked in flank by Bragg's army. The Army of the Cumberland would repulse the enemy at some point, and immediately move on toward Chattanooga. All day long it was a continuous race. At about 10 a. m. my regiment was ordered by General Rosecrans to take position and rest in a field southeast of Widow Glenn's house, and putting my regiment in the field, I sent out a skirmish line into the woods in my front, and captured a prisoner from the Confederate skirmish line that was found west of the La Fayette road. The prisoner was brought immediately to me. He was a Virginia boy, badly frightened at first, but he soon told me that he belonged to Longstreet's corps from the Virginia Army, and detailed to me how he came by cars, where they disembarked, and how they marched to the battlefield. I took the prisoner, the first one captured from Longstreet's corps, to General Rosecrans at his then headquarters at Widow Glenn's house, and told him that I had a prisoner from Longstreet's corps, when Rosecrans flew into a passion, denounced the little boy as a liar, declared that Longstreet's corps was not there. The little boy prisoner was so frightened that he would not speak a word. In sorrow I turned away, and joined my regiment. Rosecrans found out that Longstreet's corps was there.

Shortly I was ordered to march rapidly toward Chattanooga, and I suppose a mile or so northeast of Widow Glenn's house I met General Joseph J. Reynolds, who told me that King's Brigade of his division was broken by the enemy, and ordered me to dismount and try to stop the enemy that was pouring through our lines, which I did, and the Ninety-Second, with their Spencer rifles, easily, on three occasions, drove the enemy back in its immediate front as they emerged from the woods east of the La Fayette road; but they swarmed by my right flank in great force, and I was compelled to withdraw. I found thousands of Union troops in disorder floating off through the woods toward Chattanooga, but I sought and found the left flank of the Confederate troops that had broken through our lines, and reported to Colonel Wilder at Vinings, and was ordered by him to put my regiment in line dismounted on the left of his brigade.

During the night of the 19th of September Rosecrans withdrew McCook's corps on his right, and formed a new line on the low hills southwest of Widow Glenn's, Wilder withdrawing his brigade and forming a new line south of McCook's corps; but my regiment mounted before daylight covered the entire front of Wilder's Brigade, ordered to fall back to the new line when pressed by the enemy.

Daylight came; with it white flags in our front where the Confederates were burying their dead. An hour after daylight I discovered a heavy column of the enemy, in column of companies doubled on the center, slowly and silently creeping past my left flank toward the left flank of McCook's corps. I repeatedly sent him information of the approach of that heavy column of the enemy, but he testily declared that there was no truth in it, and refused to send a skirmish line of his own, that he might easily have done, and found out for himself. When Longstreet's corps sprang with a yell upon the left flank of McCook's corps, the line in my front advanced, and I retired to join Wilder as ordered. McCook's corps was wiped off the field without any attempt at real resistance, and floated off from the battlefield like flecks of foam upon a river. His artillerymen cut the traces, and leaving the guns, rode away toward Chattanooga. The rout of McCook's corps was complete. I found Wilder, who proposed to charge through Longstreet's corps with his brigade, and join Thomas on Snodgrass Hill, but Charles A. Dana, Assistant Secretary of War, rode up and ordered Wilder not to make the charge, declaring the battle was lost, and ordering Wilder to Chattanooga by the Dry Valley road. Lingering long on the field, taking up the Union hospitals at Crawfish Spring, and taking with him the abandoned artillery of McCook's corps, Wilder sullenly retired, followed by a light force of the Confederate cavalry.

The heroic conduct of Thomas on Snodgrass Hill saved the Army of the Cumberland from total rout and defeat, but that gallant soldier with his jaded but brave troops sought safety in flight to Rossville Gap under the cover of the friendly darkness of the night.

The useless battle had been fought, the useless sacrifice of thousands of brave men of the Army of the Cumberland had been made, and the shattered remnant of the Army of the Cumberland in Chattanooga, where the entire army might have been and ought to have been on the evening of September 10th, 1863, without the loss of a man or a wheel.

I cannot linger to tell how Hooker and Howard came from the Army of the Potomac to rescue the Army of the Cumberland

from its terrible plight; how the Army of the Tennessee hastened under Sherman from Vicksburg, of the battle above the clouds by Hooker's brave soldiers, or how the brave men of the Army of the Cumberland, without orders and against orders, sprung forward, up, and up, and up, for three hundred feet to the very mouths of the Confederate cannon belching grape and canister in their faces, sweeping Bragg and his Confederate Army off from Missionary Ridge. It is a magnificent story that the surviving soldiers of the grand old Army of the Cumberland will not cease telling while life lasts.

The volunteer soldiers were not only brave always, but they were sensible always. They complained very loudly when they had a right to complain, and they submitted to every hardship without complaint when there was necessity for it. Let me illustrate that. After the battle of Chickamauga my regiment was sent north of Chattanooga, on the north side of the river, to guard the river for forty miles. We were without rations for animals or men, living on a few grains of corn gathered from the rubbish left in the fields where all the corn had been taken long before, and unripe chestnuts, that we had to cut down the chestnut trees to gather. But we had a pack mule train, seventy-five mules with pack-saddles, and I sent the train over the mountains to bring rations from Bridgeport for the men of my regiment. One night we heard that the pack mule train loaded with rations was encamped on the mountain above Poe's Tavern, and would be down in the morning about 10 o'clock. That was joyful news for the men of my regiment. But at 8 o'clock the next morning I received a letter from General Garfield, Chief of Staff of the Army of the Cumberland, ordering me not to take one ration from the train, but to send the train on to Chattanooga. I gave the information to the men of my regiment. Did they complain? No. Not one man made one word of complaint. When the train came along about 10 o'clock, without any order of any kind, the men of the Ninety-Second lined up by the side of the road, swinging their hats and cheering when their own rations went by and onward toward Chattanooga, where their brave comrades of the Army of the Cumberland could not get green chestnuts to eat. That was the kind of men that composed the volunteer Army of the Union who saved the Republic.

Some of them are here tonight. They compose your Grand Army post here in Mendota. Honor them while yet you may, for, in only a few years more, the last one of that Grand Army will have gone beyond the dark river.

But the young men of today are as patriotic as the young men of 1861, and if the time ever comes when the Republic is in

danger they will spring to arms and repeat the heroic deeds of their fathers, and the Republic will last "until the sun grows cold, and the stars are old, and the leaves of the judgment book unfold."

JOURNAL
PRINTING
COMPANY

FREEPORT, ILL.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS
0 014 042 215 0

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS
0 014 042 215 0